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BRUCE MADDY-WEITZMAN
Editor

**The Moshe Dayan Center
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Tel Aviv University**

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The Middle East in 1996: Rude Awakening

MARTIN KRAMER

1996 would be remembered as the year when the “new ME” disappeared from the political lexicon. The term had come into being in the title of the 1993 book by the then-foreign minister of Israel, Shimon Peres.¹ In it, he announced that the familiar obsessions of the ME — nationhood, borders, territory, arms — had ceased to matter in an era of globalization. A new age had dawned. Nations would redefine their identities. Borders would be opened. Water and natural resources would be shared. Massive arsenals would be dismantled. The ME would become a single economic zone, devoted to the cooperative pursuit of prosperity. “I feel that I have earned the right to dream,” wrote Peres. “So much that I dreamed in the past was dismissed as fantasy but has now become thriving reality.”²

In November 1995, the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin catapulted the dreamer into the premiership of Israel. 1996 was to be the year of dream fulfillment. But it turned out differently. By the end of the year, Peres was out, Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu was in, and a question mark hovered over the peace process.

Still another surprising turn caught the region and the world off guard in 1996. In Turkey’s general elections of December 1995, the Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*; RP) had emerged as the largest single party in the Turkish parliament. In June, the RP formed a coalition with the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*; DYP) of scandal-stained Prime Minister Tansu Çiller. RP leader Necmettin Erbakan took office as Turkey’s first Islamist prime minister, as part of the coalition agreement.

It was a remarkable turn of events: Turkey had made the most resolute choice in favor of secularism of any Muslim country. Now the world watched with trepidation as Erbakan worked cautiously to open up space for Islam in a divided Turkey. As the battle lines between Islamist and secularist in Turkey grew sharper, it became clear once again that nothing could be taken for granted in the ME.

Nothing, that is, except the durability of Arab rulers. This is where most of the experts continued to predict dramatic, even revolutionary change — and precisely where no change could be detected at all.

Islamist violence persisted as a fever in various settings, most notably in Algeria. But nowhere did it threaten the survival of any Arab regime. Various dire predictions were made about the prospects of the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, where bombers managed to kill 19 US airmen in an attack in June. Similar forebodings predominated in assessments of the ruling house of Bahrain, base of the US Fifth Fleet, where riots and bombings disturbed the public order. But here, too, the violence was not regime-threatening. The traditional bogeymen of the West, Iraq’s Saddam Husayn and Libya’s Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi, seemed unfazed by the economic sanctions meant

to undermine them. The Arab world remained a firm bastion of unrelenting authoritarianism, with no relief in sight.

In Iran, there were signs of growing discontent with the Islamic order, but no basic changes in the direction of the regime. Parliamentary elections held during the year remained a closely managed exercise in regime control. (The discontent beneath the surface in Iran would only find its outlet in 1997, in the country's presidential elections.)

In short, 1996 came as a rude awakening that an "old ME" still persisted alongside the "new ME," and that conflict and authoritarian rule would not be soon banished from the region. And in the seesaw battle for the ME, it was now the "dream" that had come under siege.³

ISRAEL AND THE ARABS

In late February, Shimon Peres revealed his triumphant mood to a leading Israeli journalist. All the experts who predicted terror had been wrong, Peres said dismissively. 'Arafat had dismantled his own "terror" apparatus; he was fighting vigorously against terrorism.⁴

Just days later, a series of Hamas suicide bombs against Israeli civilian targets set in motion a stunning series of events, which would culminate in the political demise of Shimon Peres, and a Likud election victory that brought Binyamin Netanyahu to the premiership. The "window of opportunity" opened for the peace process by the Gulf War of 1991 did not close completely. But a brooding mood of pessimism descended upon the would-be architects of a different ME, Israeli and Arab alike.

FADING PERES

The year had opened on a note of optimism about prospects for an Israeli-Syrian agreement, the last big piece of the Arab-Israeli puzzle. Talks between Syria and Israel had been revived in late 1995 at the Wye Plantation in Maryland, and continued into early 1996. Peres, eager to reach an agreement, predicated a far-reaching Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights on an equally far-reaching Syrian acceptance of "full peace." The operative Israeli formula: the depth of Israeli withdrawal would be proportional to the depth of peace, defined in terms of normalization. A leading Israeli journalist summarized the Peres vision:

What Peres has in mind is an agreement whose signing ceremony will be graced by the presence of the kings of Saudi Arabia and Morocco and the princes of the Gulf. It will be a kind of grand reconciliation leading to the instant establishment of a dozen Arab embassies in Israel. He seeks a normalization beyond that which exists with Jordan. Israeli tourists would be able to drive not just to Damascus and Beirut and visit the tourist sites there — they would also be able to cross these two countries in order to reach their favorite beaches in Turkey. The land route to Europe will be open for the first time since the days of the British Mandate.⁵

But this vision of peace, far from enticing the Syrians, alarmed them. It seemed to them like a formula for Israeli hegemony, and a price Syria was under no obligation to pay in exchange for its own occupied land. At the same time, the Peres vision also met

with considerable resistance from many Israelis, who did not regard normalization as a substitute for extensive security arrangements and a retention of vital territory. US Secretary of State Warren Christopher tried to drum up excitement during shuttles to the region and appearances at the Wye talks, at one point declaring that a "new threshold" had been crossed by the parties. But by mid-February, it was clear that it would take months — if not years — to close the gaps between Israel and Syria.

The inability to achieve a breakthrough with Syria set the stage for the unraveling. When Peres concluded that there would be no dramatic signing ceremony on the eve of Israeli elections scheduled for November, he succumbed to pressure within the Labor Party to move up the elections. The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had generated a substantial residue of sympathy for the Labor government. Most polls showed Peres standing 15 points ahead of his rival, Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu. By moving up the elections, it was thought, Labor might capitalize on lingering feelings of remorse over Rabin's assassination before they vanished into history. On 11 February, Peres announced his decision to call for early elections, which were rescheduled for 29 May. Israel effectively suspended the negotiations with Syria — and inadvertently opened the door to the bold intervention of Hamas.

The Palestinian Islamist group Hamas had been waiting in the wings all along, nursing two wounds sustained in January. On 5 January, the so-called engineer, Yahya 'Ayyash, was killed by a booby-trapped cellular phone in Gaza. Israel regarded 'Ayyash as the Hamas mastermind who had inspired the wave of suicide bombings in Israeli cities the previous spring. Then, on 20 January, the first-ever Palestinian elections produced an impressive turnout of 90% in Gaza and 68% in the West Bank — despite a Hamas boycott. PLO leader Yasir 'Arafat himself received 88% of the presidential vote, and his Fath list won 50 of the 88 seats in the new Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). 'Arafat and Fath — for the most part, "outside" Palestinians who had returned by virtue of an Israeli decision — thus legitimized their authority in the West Bank and Gaza in a decisive way. Hamas looked beaten.

But the rescheduling of Israeli elections provided Hamas with an opportunity for a daring comeback against both Israel and 'Arafat, and it took full advantage. On 25 February, a suicide bomber detonated himself on a Jerusalem bus, and another suicide bomber exploded at an Ashkelon intersection. On 3 March, still another suicide bomb attack was carried out in a Jerusalem bus; the following day, yet another suicide bomb went off outside a Tel Aviv shopping center. In nine days, the Hamas bombers claimed 59 Israeli lives, and the lead bequeathed to Peres by the Rabin assassination evaporated.

The US rushed to bolster the fortunes of Peres, convening a "Peacemakers Summit" in the Egyptian Sinai resort of Sharm al-Shaykh on 13 March. US President Bill Clinton and UN Secretary-General Butrus Butrus-Ghali attended, as did leaders and officials of 29 governments, 14 of them Arab. (Syria, with Lebanon in tow was notable for its absence.) Clinton followed with a visit to Israel. Oman and Qatar received Peres for a visit on 1 April. On 18 April, Peres met 'Arafat and agreed on Hebron redeployment. On 24 April, the Palestine National Council revoked the anti-Israel clauses of the Palestinian National Covenant, which Peres proceeded to proclaim "the most significant ideological change in the ME in the last 100 years." As it would later become clear, no amount of Arab hand-shaking and American hand-holding could erase the impression left by the nine days of terror upon the Israeli body politic. The

polls, however, concealed this from the eyes of Peres and many observers. "All Peres has to do is avoid mistakes and act prime ministerial from now until the end of May," wrote a leading Israeli journalist in late April.⁶

Hizballah, the Iranian-backed Shi'ite movement in Lebanon, also contributed to the defeat of the best-laid plans of Peres. A gradual escalation of fighting between Israel and Hizballah in Israel's self-declared "security zone" in Southern Lebanon spilled over into artillery duels. On 11 April, Israel opened a major artillery offensive, code-named "Operation Grapes of Wrath," which was matched by Hizballah rocket firings. Some 200,000 Lebanese fled South Lebanon for Beirut, while 50,000 Israelis fled northern Israel and many more spent days in shelters. On 18 April, Israeli shells were fired at a suspected Hizballah artillery battery adjacent to a Unifil base at the village of Qana where many Lebanese civilians had taken refuge. An Israeli shell scored a direct hit on the civilians, killing 102 of them. From that moment onward, Grapes of Wrath turned sour: the Arab world, including Israel's peace partners, were outraged; Israel's Arab citizens threatened to boycott the vote for the premiership in protest; and the new "understandings" hastily negotiated with US mediation bound Israel's hands ever more tightly in its battle with Hizballah. Peres was denied the opportunity to create even the illusion of peace on the eve of elections, and his own polls showed that the operation shaved off the last edge he enjoyed.

How would a Peres government have acted had it been reelected? According to press reports, in its first 100 days, it would have completed the Hebron redeployment and pushed forward the final-status negotiations, with an emphasis on borders and settlements. Oslo architect Yossi Beilin and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmud 'Abbas (Abu Mazin) had already worked out a plan by which Israel would annex 11% of the West Bank, home to 90% of the 140,000 Israeli settlers. In return, the Palestinians would receive independent statehood. Neither Peres nor 'Arafat had endorsed this plan, but it seemed a likely point of departure for the sequel.

But on 29 May, Netanyahu defeated Peres by a margin of 0.9% of the total vote. Among Jewish Israeli voters, Netanyahu's margin of victory stood at 11% — a resounding triumph, which ultimately spelled the end of the political career of Shimon Peres. Israelis had lost their confidence in the dream, or at least their willingness to be led by a dreamer. Most still supported the peace process begun at Oslo. But most insisted that it be carried forward by a leader who put security at the head of the agenda, and who would put 'Arafat's feet to the fire over every commitment made to Israel.

ENTER NETANYAHU

Who was Binyamin Netanyahu? The Israeli public, and the region's leaders, knew less about him than they had known about any other incoming Israeli prime minister. At age 46, he was Israel's youngest premier. He first came to public notice as the brother of a war hero who fell in the Entebbe operation in 1976, and in whose memory Netanyahu had created an institute to fight terrorism. He then served as Israeli ambassador to the UN and deputy foreign minister, and in 1993 managed to wrest away the leadership of the Likud Party from the old guard, following their defeat in the 1992 general elections. Was he an ideologue or a pragmatist? No one could say for certain, but one truth was beyond all doubt: Netanyahu was a consummate politician.

A sixth sense had brought him from the far edge to the pinnacle of Israeli politics, and he intended to do whatever it took to remain there.

Netanyahu had a very different vision of the ME and Israel's place in it. He would have subscribed to the characterization of the ME once offered by the late Elie Kedourie: "a wilderness of tigers." While Peres had conjured up images of a Benelux-style integration of Israel and its neighbors, Netanyahu believed that Israel should establish with its neighbors a set of security understandings of the kind that had governed the Cold War. Security, not normalization, was the only firm foundation of peace. The Oslo accords, in his view, sacrificed too much security to the vicissitudes of Palestinian and general Arab politics. Netanyahu had seen one Israeli prime minister lose his life, and another his career, for having relied upon Yasir 'Arafat. He would not make the same mistake.

In the first months of the Netanyahu government, its ministers did not meet with 'Arafat and opened few channels to his deputies. Foreign Minister David Levy met 'Arafat on 23 July, but Netanyahu did not meet him until 4 September. It was not a warm meeting, and did nothing to alleviate the Palestinian sense that Israeli concessions would be few and far between.

The situation required a deft Israeli hand and Palestinian restraint. As it happened, both were in short supply. On 23 September, Netanyahu decided to open a 2,000-year-old Hasmonean tunnel in Jerusalem to public passage. The tunnel ran alongside the long-buried perimeter wall of what Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call the *al-Haram al-Sharif* ("the Noble Sanctuary"). In other circumstances, the opening might have caused little stir. But in the climate of stalemate, it ignited a Palestinian explosion. In some places, pitched battles were fought between Israeli forces and Palestinian police. The death toll reached 60 Palestinians and 15 Israelis.

Again, the Americans stepped in, convening an emergency summit in Washington from 1–2 October. Clinton, Netanyahu, 'Arafat, and Jordan's King Husayn attended. The crisis of late September put American diplomacy into high gear for the first time since Netanyahu's election, in an effort to bring about the Israeli redeployment from Hebron. It was still a lengthy process, and an agreement was not finally reached until January 1997. With that redeployment, Netanyahu could argue that he had met all the specific Israeli obligations under existing accords.

The Syrian track did no better. Netanyahu's government insisted that talks be resumed without preconditions; Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad demanded that they be resumed where (he thought) they had ended under the previous Israeli government. In September, there was even a war scare reminiscent of the bad old days, when Syria redeployed forces in Lebanon, possibly in anticipation of an Israeli attack. Reassuring messages had to be shuttled back and forth by the Americans to defuse the tension.

By the close of the year, it had become clear to all that Israel under Netanyahu would not follow the script written by the previous government, and instead would follow a script of its own. The peace process, which had been on fast-forward, was now put on pause — which, for many Arabs, was tantamount to reverse. King Husayn of Jordan expressed the general Arab pessimism: "In the current situation, if we do not strike strongly forward to achieve peace, everything imaginable can happen, including a revival of 1991 when Netanyahu — not that I want that to happen — wore his gas mask on television."⁷

But Oslo did not unravel. The September violence did not turn into a new Palestin-

ian uprising: the Palestinian Authority (PA) had too much to lose. And the Israeli Government did not carry out a host of campaign promises threatening harsh measures against the PA. Israel had too much to lose. A new reality — bordering on surreality — now existed: Israelis and Palestinians shared control in a complex pattern of interdependencies. Neither could afford to abandon the search for a workable compromise.

TURKEY'S RETURN TO ISLAM?

Another major surprise was the establishment in June of a coalition government in Turkey, which left the premiership in the hands of the veteran Islamist leader, Necmettin Erbakan. Erbakan's party had taken the largest percentage of votes of any party in the December 1995 parliamentary elections (21.4%), and attempts to keep him out of power finally broke apart on the rocks of infighting among secularists. Erbakan's RP and Tansu Çiller's DYP cemented their alliance in June, and won a vote of confidence in July. The demands of coalition politics diminished the impact of the change: the government still had a secular anchor in the DYP, and Erbakan showed great caution. As a result, the secular elite and the army seemed prepared to let the experiment run. (Only in 1997 did their growing concern prompt moves that put Erbakan back out of office.)

In 1996, the government's Islamism took the form of various overtures to other Muslim countries. In particular, Erbakan visited Iran in August, where he signed an agreement for a gas pipeline project worth \$23bn. Gas from Iran and Turkmenistan would be pumped through Tabriz to Ankara. The Americans were none too pleased by this defiance of their economic embargo of Iran. Iranian President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani visited Turkey in December, accompanied by a large delegation. Rafsanjani's daughter, who accompanied him, showed a singular lack of tact when she declared that Turkey reminded her of Iran on the eve of the Islamic revolution — an assessment that caused great offense to many Turks. Erbakan's dance with Iran would later work much against him in the halls of power — both in Ankara and in Washington.

On one issue, there was a consensus between Islamists and secularists: there would be no pause in the ongoing battle in the southeastern provinces between government forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Parti Kerkeren Kurdistan*; PKK). But neither did the government achieve a breakthrough. Despite far-reaching measures, including the forced evacuation of many Kurdish villages in the affected area, the insurgency simmered on.

The conflict with the PKK drew Turkey ever more deeply into ME affairs. Relations with Syria were particularly affected by the continued presence of PKK leaders in Damascus. In May, a series of explosions in several Syrian cities were widely attributed to agents of Turkey, as a warning to Syria against its tolerance of the PKK. In June, Turkey introduced several thousand troops into northern Iraq to attack PKK bases, and briefly considered establishing a permanent "security zone" there, a possibility that gave rise to widespread Arab concern. In October, Libya's ruler Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi delivered a verbal slap to a visiting Erbakan, when he told a joint news conference that "the state of Kurdistan should take its place in the spectrum of nations under the ME sun. Turkey should not fight against people seeking their independence."

Erbakan looked the fool for having gone to Libya in the first place, and nearly lost a vote of confidence for having done so. The Arab world appeared increasingly like a base of moral and material support for Kurdish separatism, putting new strains on Turkish-Arab relations.

In this context, it was perhaps little wonder that Israeli-Turkish relations flourished as never before. In February, the two states reached an agreement formalizing their military cooperation. In March, Süleyman Demirel became the first Turkish president to pay a state visit to Israel. Çiller visited Israel in August, and signed a defense technology agreement. Erbakan did not like this pursuit of the Israeli option, but he could do little to prevent it, as the army strongly favored it. In 1996, the Turkish-Israeli alliance became an operational reality — and put the Arabs very much on their guard.

THE ARAB IMPASSE

Netanyahu's election delivered a sharp jolt to an Arab world that had grown complacent about the peace process and Israeli politics. The change in Israel prompted an Arab summit conference in June, the first since 1990 (see chapter on inter-Arab relations). The Syrian-born poet Nizar Qabbani "celebrated" the event in verse, in a poem directed toward the assembled heads-of-state:

If Binyamin Netanyahu has been able to remind you of your identity, of the place and date of your birth, to restore to you your Arab nationality, how beautiful it is what he has done.

If this man has been able to restore the Arabs to their Arabism, and the children of stones to their childhood,

If he has been able to remind us of our names, and the names of our fathers, and the names of our children,

A thousand welcomes to his arrival.

Gentlemen, this is the last occasion of love open to you before you become extinct.⁸

The poet, of course, exaggerated. The leaders assembled at Cairo were hardly on the road to extinction. And they had excellent memories — not only for their names, but for what they had done to one another over the years — so the summit itself was preceded by the usual inter-Arab jostling, including some high-pitched polemic exchanges between Jordan and Syria. Iraq was barred from the summit; never before had an Arab League member state been told to stay away. Inter-Arab politics retained their highly fragmented quality.

The summit did create a very broad linkage between progress in peace negotiations and normalization with Israel. This became clear with the approach of the third ME and North Africa economic conference, which met in Cairo in November. Such conferences were meant to serve the Peres vision of regional economic cooperation as the ballast for peace. In the absence of Peres and peace progress, the conference was a decidedly chilly affair. "At previous conferences in Casablanca and Amman, there was the false impression that a certain state was at the center of regional cooperation," announced Egypt's foreign minister. "In Cairo, this false impression was rectified."⁹ But since the new Israeli government did not regard normalization with the same awe as the previous one, the effect of the cold shoulder on Israeli policy was negligible. The result was a growing Arab frustration.

It was tempered, however, by a certain relief at the shelving of schemes that placed Israel at the center of a "new ME." A last reprieve had been granted to Arab politics, even to Arab solidarity. For a while longer, it would still be business as usual.

THE REGIMES HOLD FIRM

Nowhere was business more usual than at home. Arab regimes may have been weak vis-à-vis Israel, but they showed great strength against their own opponents and dissidents. They did so in defiance of most of the theoreticians, whose models postulated a weakening of the regime in face of an emerging "civil society" or a militant Islamism.

The so-called pariah states, Iraq and Libya, seemed immune to the sanctions imposed on them by the West. The most striking example was provided by Saddam Husayn. Saddam's errant cousin and son-in-law, Husayn Kamil, who had fled to Jordan the previous year to plan a "change" in Iraq, was enticed back to Baghdad in February. Within three days, he and much of his family were dead. The Iraqi opposition was said to have reached ever greater degrees of fragmentation, and a CIA-backed opposition plot to undermine Saddam completely unraveled. (An attempt to assassinate Saddam's eldest son 'Udayy, in December, seriously wounded him, but failed.) Saddam even managed to rebuild some influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, outside Baghdad's control since 1991. The faction of Kurds under Mas'ud Barzani, which had been linked with the US, called in Saddam's support in their rivalry with the faction of Kurds under Jalal Talabani. Iraqi troops reentered parts of Iraqi Kurdistan at Kurdish invitation, while the US evacuated its own Kurdish personnel from the area. Iraq also managed to negotiate an "oil-for-food" deal with the UN. In 1996, Saddam looked as firmly in control as ever.

So too did Libya's Qadhafi. Despite sanctions and threats, he ruled on, and bolstered his position by improving relations with Egypt. In May he visited Cairo, and returned in June for the Arab summit, flying in from Tripoli in defiance of the UN air embargo of Libya. Mubarak returned a visit to Tripoli in December. Libya had been under various sanctions for a decade, and had become a textbook case in their limitations.

The regimes of the so-called failed states, Algeria and Sudan, also demonstrated a remarkable resilience: the dislocations of civil war still could not break their determined grip on the apparatus of state. In Algeria the regime led by President Liamine Zeroual seemed to have gained the upper hand over Islamist challengers. On 28 November, the regime successfully put through a referendum on constitutional amendments which effectively excluded Islamist parties from political competition. The US, impressed by the resilience of Zeroual, warmed to him. The successes of the army led to further fragmentation among the Islamists, who resorted to ever more random violence, thus further alienating the Algerian public.

In Sudan, elections in March further entrenched President 'Umar al-Bashir; the new National Assembly elevated Hasan al-Turabi to the position of Speaker. In April, the government signed a "political charter" with one faction of the southern opposition, and factional fighting broke out among the regime's opponents in the south. In December, northern opposition leader Sadiq al-Mahdi fled Sudan for Eritrea. Sudan continued to be described by many critics as a hopeless case of economic failure and human rights abuses. But neither flaw appeared to be fatal to the Islamist regime.

The "quasi states" of the Arab world, Lebanon and the PA, also made signal progress in consolidating their rule. Parliamentary elections in Lebanon, held in stages through the summer, were a testament to the fine control exercised by Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and his Syrian patrons. Even Hizballah's representation in parliament was trimmed back. Palestinian elections were freer, but the Islamists decided to stay out altogether, so that the elections returned a lopsided victory for the regime. And a "regime" it was: 'Arafat's "Palestine" fit the broader pattern, with its 40,000 security men for only 2m. people, its centralized economy riddled with official corruption, and its intimidation of free expression.

The traditionally strong Arab states remained strong, and even grew stronger, usually at the expense of an exhausted Islamism. Egypt was a case in point. For most of the 1990s, critics had speculated that Islamist violence might produce revolution. (Thus wrote an American journalist in his country's leading foreign affairs journal in 1993: "For the US, it is impossible not to compare the current situation in Egypt with the one that led to the disastrous fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979.")¹⁰ By 1996, it was clear that the regime had weathered the storm, and Egyptian President Husni Mubarak did not hesitate to haul even the most moderate Islamists into court, as the final stage of the mop-up. Only parts of Upper Egypt, redoubt of the Islamist opposition, remained to be pacified.

What did this pattern of regime resilience — replicated from Morocco to Jordan, from Tunisia to Oman — say about the nature of ME politics? The conclusion seemed inescapable: "civil society" remained a paper theory, regimes had hidden resources and strengths. They rested upon elites, groups, sects, families, and tribes that had a strong vested interest in their continued rule. Many of the rulers, especially monarchs whose claims rested upon a combination of descent and Islam, enjoyed a legitimacy invisible to outsiders but omnipresent for their subjects. And beneath the massive inefficiencies of the state, there were very efficient security services that knew how to ferret out opponents of the existing order.

INFORMATION BLACKOUT

What might break the strong knot of interests at the core of the Arab state? Through the mid-1990s, attention had begun to focus upon the impact of the information revolution. One American professor put it this way:

In Cairo, Damascus, Algiers or Baghdad, international radio and television signals penetrate government censorship and bring images of the world that confound government-approved versions....Access to modern communications technology such as computer e-mail — which inherently undermines vertical structures of control — is growing....The proliferation of printing ateliers and corner shop photocopy machines ensures that people have more to read than government-dominated newspapers. Popularly oriented political tracts and religious pamphlets are readily available from street vendors.¹¹

But it was unclear whether new information technologies would create more pluralism or more government control. Satellite dishes had proliferated, but who controlled the satellites? In April, the BBC shut down its Arabic television channel, an eight-hour-a-day news service which had won high acclaim. The service had been done in partnership with a Saudi satellite company that relayed the transmissions to

the region. The company, however, began to edit out certain references to Saudi Arabia. When a *Panorama* program on human rights in Saudi Arabia was cut, the BBC charged political interference, and closed down the channel.¹² This was just one more signal that the regimes had every intention of seeking to dominate satellite television, or shut it out altogether.

Other outlets were also closing up. Lebanon for decades had been a center for the free flow of information; independent radio and television stations had flourished throughout the civil war, and numbered in the hundreds. But in mid-September, the Lebanese cabinet announced a licensing policy that would drastically cut back on the number of private stations. Only four television stations and 11 radio stations would be licensed; only 3 of the radio stations would be allowed to broadcast news. Lebanese journalists demonstrated against the media law, but to no avail. Other laws under consideration would regulate satellite broadcasting.

And what of the internet, the medium beyond all control? On maps of internet penetration, most of the ME looked like a black hole. Many countries had no gateways at all, others had a few, and access to them was relatively expensive. Baud rates were low. All this served the existing order perfectly well. And after all, wasn't it the duty of government to protect citizens or subjects from the "Western cultural invasion"? "Information policy" in many countries of the region remained policy designed to block the flow of information. As one journalist put it:

Nobody in the Western computer industry is waiting around for the Arabs to make up their minds about whether, and on what terms, they want to join the information revolution. This, far more than fears of Israeli economic hegemony, ought to be animating the statesmen and politicians who run the Arab world. Sadly it does not, and with each passing month the gap separating the late 20th century's haves and have-nots grows wider.¹³

The only efficient computer networks were those established in the service of the state, especially for purposes of domestic surveillance. And if the average Middle Easterner ever did get to the internet, he or she would find that the state had gotten there first. In 1996, even Jordan's General Intelligence Department opened a site on the World Wide Web (www/arab.net/gid).

DILEMMAS OF THE POWERS

With the end of the Cold War, the ME had ceased to be a zone of great power rivalry. Since the end of the 1991 Gulf War, American preeminence in the region had been beyond dispute. American policy rested on two pillars: promotion of the Arab-Israeli peace process by active diplomacy, and stabilization of the Gulf by a direct military presence. The objectives were an Arab-Israeli settlement and the isolation of all those who challenged American preeminence, especially Iraq and Iran. In 1996, those objectives seemed to recede further beyond the horizon.

AMERICA'S TROUBLES

With Netanyahu's election, the efforts to negotiate an Israeli-Syrian agreement — the crux of the US mediating effort — ground to a halt, and the US spent more time working to keep a lid on Israeli-Palestinian tensions. An influential article by Richard

Haas, a former head of the ME desk of the National Security Council in the Bush Administration, put forth an approach that seemed to resonate in the Administration: the peace process was like a stock that had been oversold, a correction was inevitable, and the US could do little more than preserve some of the gains already made. It was not an ambitious vision.

In the Gulf, Saddam represented a persistent headache — but not one for which the US was prepared to risk brain surgery. An American journalist explained the long list of conditions the US attached to the removal of Saddam. It would be welcome “if the Iraqis themselves could remove Saddam from the scene neatly, replace him with another strongman, keep the country intact, and do it without bothering the neighbors.”¹⁴ But as none of these conditions could be met, half-measures prevailed — and produced half-results. On 3–4 September, the US fired a barrage of cruise missiles against Iraqi installations, in response to the entrance of Iraqi forces into Kurdistan. It was an act of frustration: the CIA-backed Iraqi opposition had collapsed, American influence in Iraqi Kurdistan was in a tailspin, and Saddam’s own fortunes in Arab eyes were climbing. There were also worrying signs that Russia, France and Turkey were prepared to bolt the anti-Saddam coalition.

The bombing in Khubar, near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 US airmen on 25 June was a direct challenge — not so much to the Saudi monarchy, as to the US presence in the Gulf. The rub: while the challenge could not have been more direct, it was not clear from which direction it had come. (Indecisive) lines of evidence combined with plain speculation to keep the strategists busy with scenarios of US retaliatory strikes against Iran. But here, too, the US Administration was not eager for confrontation, especially in an election year, and the bombing never escalated into a crisis. The US did try to win greater international adherence to the regime of economic sanctions it applied to Iran. On 5 August, Clinton signed into law a bill imposing sanctions against companies — including foreign companies — doing major business with Iran (and Libya). The Europeans and the Japanese regarded this with undisguised contempt — the EU commissioner called it “unacceptable” — and it had but limited effect. Most notably, it failed to deter the French energy company Total from moving forward with major oil and gas projects in Iran.

The result of these Gulf troubles was an invigorated debate over the merits of the policy of “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran, and over the unqualified support given by the US to client regimes in the Gulf.

THE COMEBACK POWERS

Other lesser powers, sensing that the US had reached the limits of its diplomatic, military, and economic leverage, began to assert themselves in the ME. Russia and France took the lead.

On the face of it, Russia’s new assertiveness in the region bore little resemblance to the Soviet Union’s past role. Russian involvement, shorn of the military and political dictates of the Cold War, had a strong foundation in economics and trade. But Russian nostalgists also began to entertain the idea of a strategic comeback in the ME — a possibility enhanced in January by the appointment of an Arabist, Yevgeni Primakov, as Russian foreign minister. Primakov subsequently visited Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the PA, dropping hints along the way that Russia wished to have forces in any future peacekeeping arrangement between Israel and

Syria. But Russian policy placed its prime emphasis on Iraq and Iran. In Iraq, Russia signed potentially important agreements for development of oil production, in the hope that oil revenues would eventually make it possible for Iraq to repay billions in past loans. In Iran, Russia's involvement centered upon technology transfer, including the completion of a nuclear reactor and weapons sales.

France also raised its profile. The visit by French President Jacques Chirac to Lebanon in April was the first visit of a French president in the 50 years of Lebanon's independence. Chirac urged an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, and made a much more muted plea for Syrian disengagement from the country. There was much Gaullist nostalgia to the visit, with its emphasis on France's sympathies for Arab aspirations. France took an even more prominent role in the diplomatic aftermath of Grapes of Wrath, the Israeli operation in Lebanon which went so awry. French Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette set off on visits to Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. Shimon Peres later complained of "total confusion" created by "multiple mediations" of the crisis. But in the end, France won a place on the committee established to supervise the Israeli-Hizballah understanding. Chirac was back in the region in October, visiting Syria, Israel, and the PA. In Jerusalem's Old City, he had a much-televised face-down with Israeli security guards; in Ramallah he became the first foreign head of state to address the PLC.

Did the Russian and French initiatives matter? No one in the region mistook Moscow or Paris for Washington, and all roads led back to the White House. But the ME continued to invite rivalry between powers, again posing an "Eastern Question" that never seemed to find a decisive Western answer. If the US were to maintain its edge, it would have to restore some of the momentum lost in 1996.

NOTES

For the place and frequency of publications cited here, and for the full name of the publication, news agency, radio station or monitoring service where an abbreviation is used, please see "List of Sources." Only in the case of more than one publication bearing the same name is the place of publication noted here.

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